

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 311

SP 012 269

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 TITLE Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of Instructional Practices in Selected Conventional and Alternative Public Schools.
 PUB DATE 28 Mar 78
 NOTE 38p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting, American Educational Research Association (Toronto, Canada, March 27-31, 1978)
 EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$2.06 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Alternative Schools; *Comparative Analysis; *Educational Practice; *Public Schools; School Surveys; *Secondary Education; Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes; *Teaching Procedures

ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study are to determine (1) if public alternative school teachers' perceptions of their instructional practices differ significantly from those of teachers in conventional schools in the same district and (2) if public alternative school students' perceptions of teaching practices in their school differ significantly from those of students in conventional schools in the same district. Instruments were administered to students and teachers in three alternative high schools and three conventional high schools, all operated by the same public school system. Teachers were asked to rate each of thirty-six functions on a scale of one to five. Students were asked to rank twenty-seven items on a scale from one to ten. Differences in the two groups of teacher ratings for nineteen of the thirty-six functions were significant at the .05 level or beyond, and seventeen of the twenty-seven items on the student instrument revealed differences at the same level. It was concluded from the findings that alternative school instructional practices differ significantly from those in the conventional schools. (Author/MJB)

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TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES
IN SELECTED CONVENTIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Presented at the American Educational Research
Association Annual Meeting
Toronto, March 28, 1978

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Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of Instructional Practices in Selected Conventional and Alternative Public Schools

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Purposes

In the past few years, more and more public school systems throughout the United States have developed optional or alternative schools. The National Center for Options in Public Education has estimated that over 10,000 such schools are now operating throughout the country (Barr, 1976a). Some recent literature suggests that teaching practices in public alternative schools are substantially different from those in conventional schools (Barr and Burke, 1973; Barr, 1974) and that alternative school teachers' beliefs about their role differs from that of their conventional school counterparts (Capron, Kleiman, and Levy, 1972; Miller, 1976). Other studies have indicated that teaching practices in alternative instructional settings do not necessarily differ widely from those found in the conventional school (Zeli, 1975; Jolley, 1974; Barr, 1976b). The purpose of this study was to answer the following questions: (1) Do public alternative school teachers' perceptions of their own instructional practices differ significantly from those of teachers in conventional schools in the same district? If so, in what particular ways? (2) Do public alternative school students' perceptions of teaching practices in their schools differ significantly from those of students in conventional public schools in the same district? If so, in what particular ways?

Perspectives

The rationale for creating alternative schools rests on two major assumptions. The first assumption is that people learn in different ways. Conditions which enable one student to learn quickly may prove inefficacious -- or even inhospitable -- for another student (Wright, 1972; Fizell, 1976; Witkin and Moore, 1974; Grieve and Davis, 1971; Joyce and Weil, 1972; Dunn

and Dunn, 1974).

The second major assumption is that there are in fact distinct styles of teaching, a contention that finds support in the literature (Withall, 1952; Flanders, 1962; Joyce, 1975; Foshay, 1975; Kendall and Solomon, 1975).

It is a fundamental assumption of this study that teachers' expressed beliefs about their instructional practices are reasonably congruent with actual practices. This assumption is based on evidence that teachers' beliefs about what they hold to be important and unimportant do affect the way they behave in the classroom (Chittenden and Bussis, 1971; Kerlinger and Pedhazur, 1967; Wolfson, 1967; Wlodarczyk, 1972).

Procedures

A list of teaching functions was drawn up, expanding and adapting Ehman's and Van Sickle's matrix of teaching skills (Ehman and Van Sickle, 1973). The list was refined and expanded further after being criticized by a panel of education professors and public school teachers who were not included in the study. The thirty-six items on the final instrument administered to teachers cover a reasonably exhaustive range of possible teacher functions in the areas of goal selection and planning, selection and use of materials, instruction and class management, and evaluation. (See Exhibit 1.) A second instrument, designed to measure students' perceptions of instructional practices, was derived directly from the list of thirty-six functions on the teacher instrument. (See Exhibit 2.)

EXHIBIT 1

TEACHING FUNCTIONS

1. Select learning objectives appropriate for students.
2. Locate and select audio-visual materials.
3. Locate and select material to supplement textbooks.
4. Assist students in clarifying and deciding on their learning objectives.
5. Adapt material from several sources in lieu of a textbook.
6. Plan learning activities for the class.
7. Invent and prepare learning materials.
8. Plan varied learning activities for sub-groups within class.
9. Maintain an orderly classroom.
10. Assist students in planning their own learning activities.
11. Assist individual students in dealing with personal concerns.
12. Lead discussions.
13. Provide short-term out-of-school experiences (arrange and supervise one-day field trips, picnics, etc.).
14. Provide extended out-of-school experiences (arrange and supervise overnight field trips, camping trips, etc.).
15. Provide on-going out-of-school experiences (arrange and supervise work-study experiences, supervise students performing community service, etc.).
16. Present subject matter orally and visually.
17. Use community resources in class (invite speakers; obtain material from social service agencies, government, industry, etc.).
18. Ask questions that provide for student recall and integration of prior knowledge.
19. Use simulations.

EXHIBIT 1 (Cont.)

TEACHING FUNCTIONS (Cont.)

20. Act as a resource for individual students or small groups.
21. Ask questions that elicit student ideas.
22. Provide remedial instruction.
23. Elicit and use student reactions to modify instructional methods.
24. Used programmed instructional material.
25. Administer pre-tests of student knowledge.
26. Administer pre-tests of student attitudes.
27. Administer post-tests of student knowledge.
28. Administer post-tests of student attitudes.
29. Facilitate group processes within class.
30. Use written evaluations of student achievement.
31. Evaluate student work and assign numerical or letter grades.
32. Use student learning contracts.
33. Grade on a pass-fail basis.
34. Select or prepare material for individualized learning.
35. Ask questions that elicit students' feelings.
36. Maintain resource centers or learning centers in the classroom.

EXHIBIT 2

STUDENT ITEMS

IN THE CLASSES IN MY SCHOOL:

1. the teacher decides what students should learn.
2. the teacher uses audio-visual materials.
3. we use textbooks.
4. the teacher helps students decide what they want to learn.
5. the teacher decides what we will do in class.
6. small groups work on different things during class.
7. the teacher keeps the class quiet and orderly.
8. the teacher helps students decide what to do in class.
9. the teacher helps students individually with their personal problems.
10. the teacher leads discussions.
11. we take one-day field trips.
12. we take over-night field trips.
13. we spend part of the school day working or studying in the community.
14. the teacher lectures.
15. we have guest speakers in class.
16. we use learning games or role playing in class.
17. the teacher asks questions about information we have learned.
18. the teacher asks for students' ideas.
19. the teacher asks students to express their feelings.
20. students work individually at their own pace.

EXHIBIT 2 (Cont.)

STUDENT ITEMS (Cont.)

21. the teacher asks students to evaluate his or her teaching.
22. the teacher gives students a pre-test before beginning a topic or unit.
23. the teacher gives students a test after a topic or unit is completed.
24. the teacher gives numerical or letter grades on report cards.
25. written evaluations of students' work are sent to parents.
26. students sign learning contracts.
27. work is graded on a pass-fail basis.

All data was collected in April, 1975.

The teacher instrument was administered to purposive samples of twenty-six teachers in three alternative high schools and twenty-six teachers in three conventional high schools. A purposive sample of eighty-six students from the same schools completed the student instrument. All six schools are operated by the Grand Rapids Independent School District, and each teacher is a certified, full-time employee of that school district. Every alternative school in the study offers all subjects required for graduation. Students attend the alternative schools voluntarily.

The teachers in this study were asked to rate each of the thirty-six teaching functions on a scale of one to five. A rating of five would indicate that the respondent believes that particular teaching function receives very great emphasis in his or her teaching. A four indicates great emphasis, a three, some emphasis, a two, little emphasis, and a one, no emphasis. For each teaching function, a mean rating was calculated for both the public alternative school teachers and the conventional school teachers. A t value was derived for each pair of ratings, and its significance was determined by reference to a t table. A two-tailed test of significance was used at the .05 level of probability.

Teachers were also asked to rank order all teaching functions according to the degree of emphasis each received in his or her teaching. A mean ranking of the functions were determined for both groups of teachers. The two sets of rankings were compared by means of the Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient. Since n was greater than ten, the correlation coefficient (r_s) was converted to a t value. A two-tailed test of significance was used at the .05 level of probability.

Students rated each item on a scale of one to ten. A rating of ten meant the action always takes place in classes in the student's school. A rating of one indicated the item never occurred. A mean rating was determined for each item, both for conventional school students and public alternative school students. A t value was computed for each pair of items and a two-tailed test of significance was used at the .05 level of probability.

Findings and Interpretations

Differences in the two groups of teachers' ratings for nineteen of the thirty-six functions were significant at the .05 level or beyond. (See Figures 1-5.) Three other items elicited mean scores whose differences were significant only at the .1 level. However, they were deemed interesting enough to include in the following graphic representations. Seventeen of the twenty-seven items on the student instrument drew responses whose differences were significant at the .05 level or beyond. (See Figures 6-9.) The difference in ranking of the teaching functions by the alternative school and conventional school teachers yielded a t score of 3.87, significant beyond the .001 level. (See Table 1.)

FIGURE 1

PLANNING: SELECTION OF GOALS AND PLANNING OF ACTIVITIES

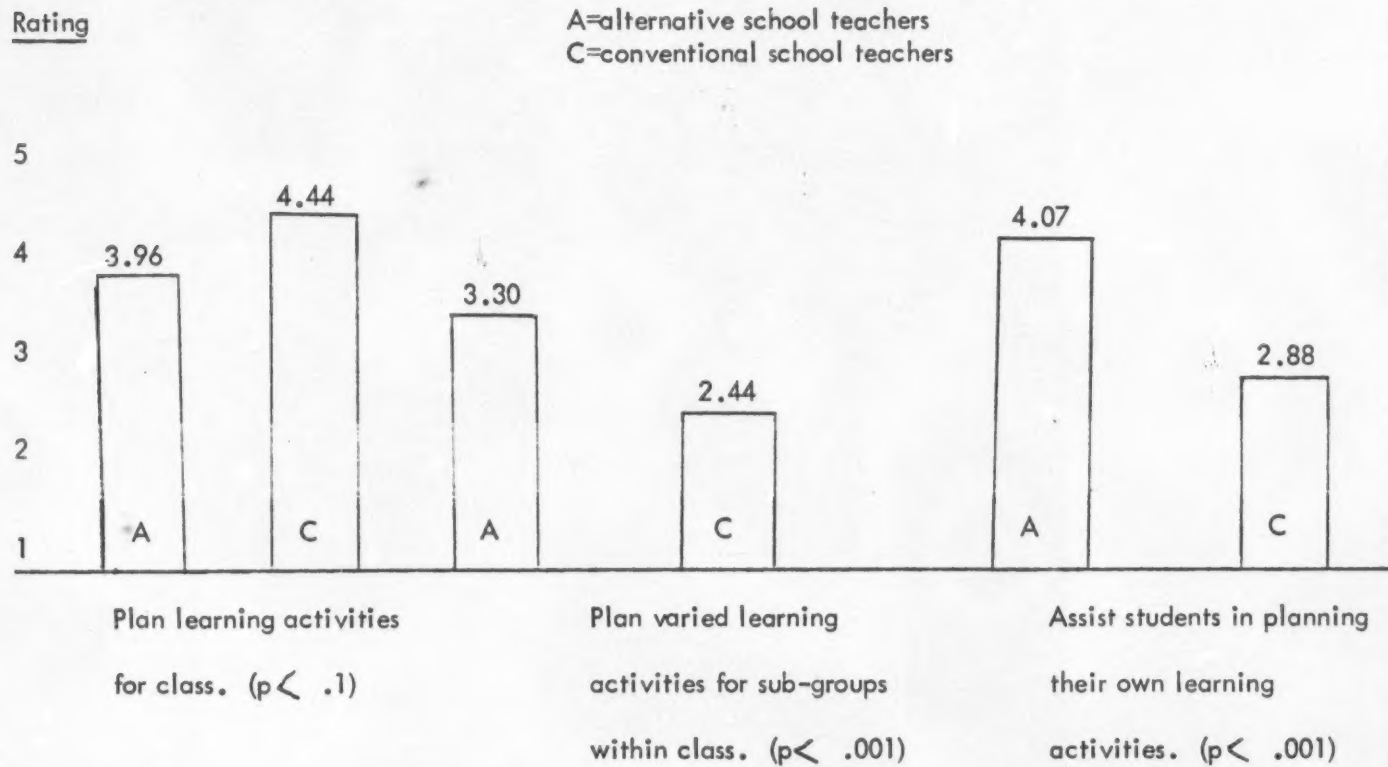


FIGURE 2

SELECTION AND USE OF MATERIALS

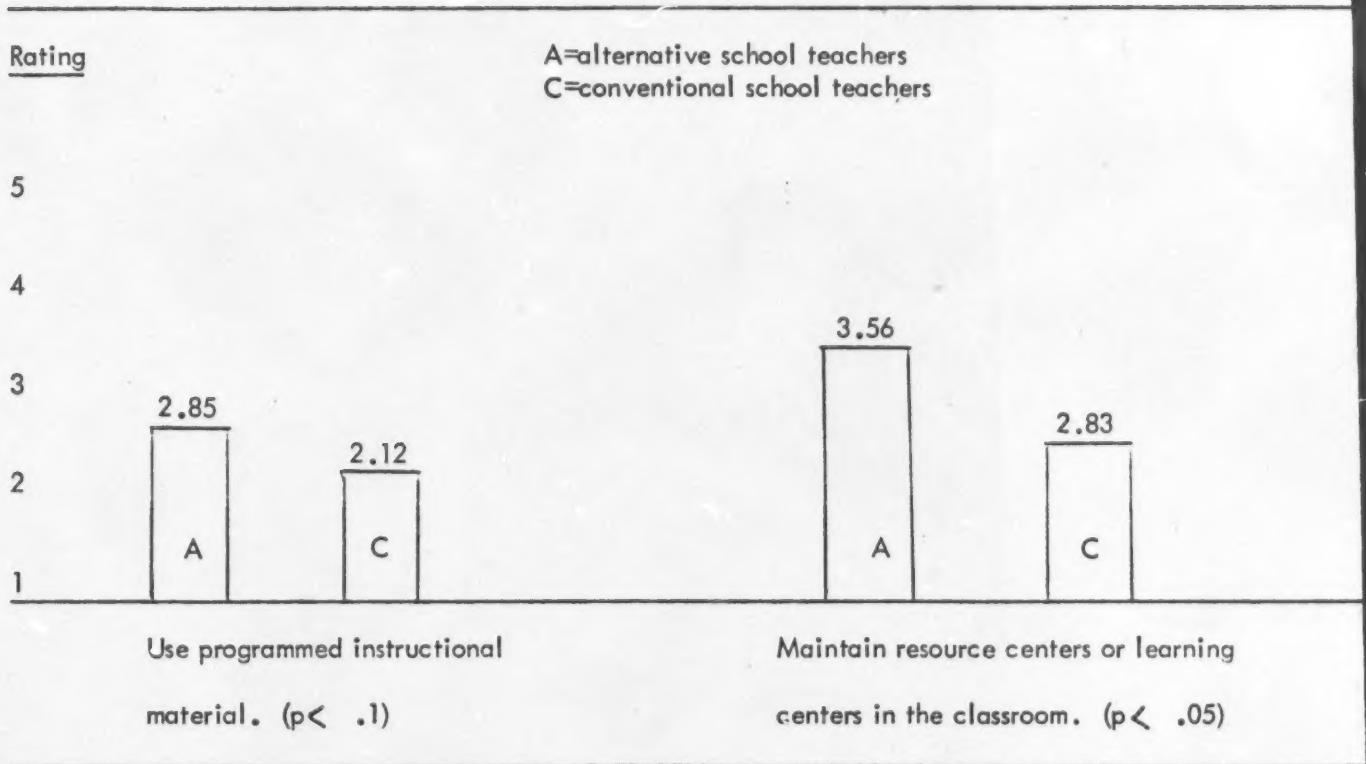


FIGURE 2 (Continued)

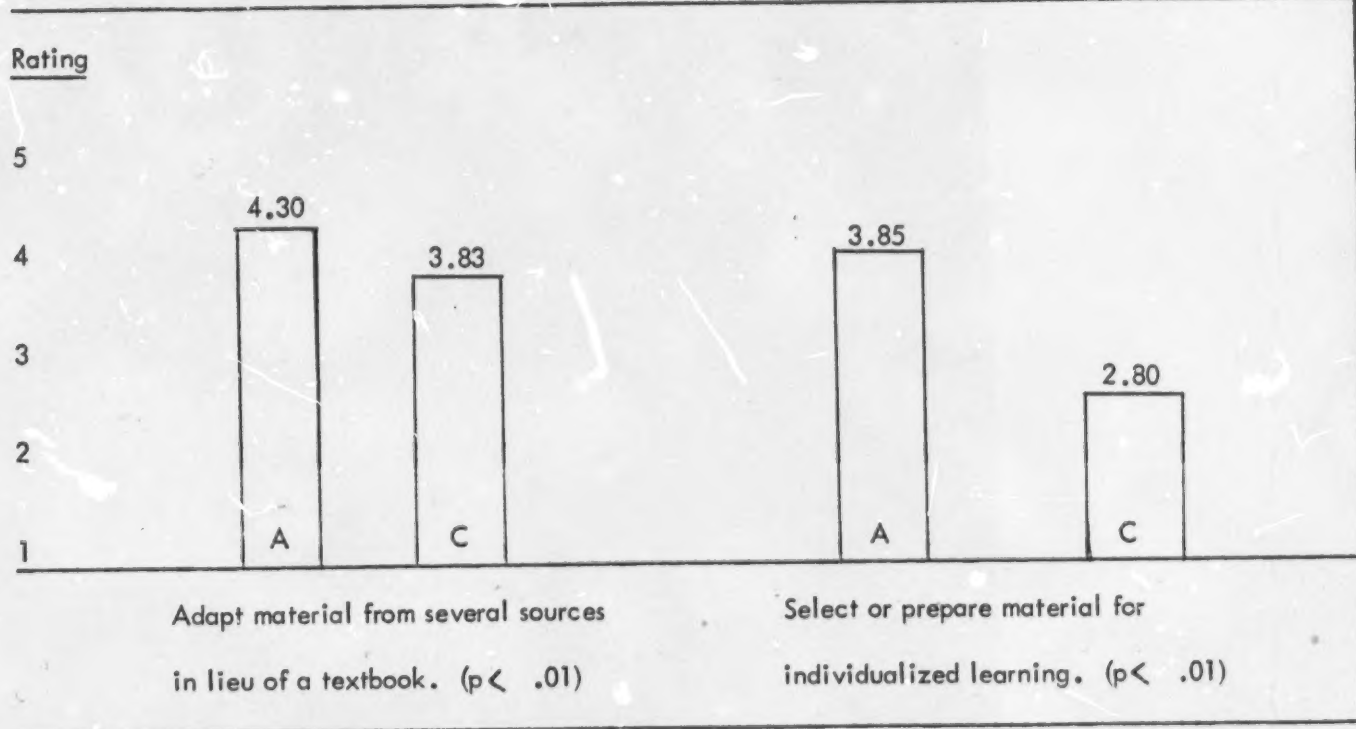


FIGURE 3
INSTRUCTION AND CLASS MANAGEMENT

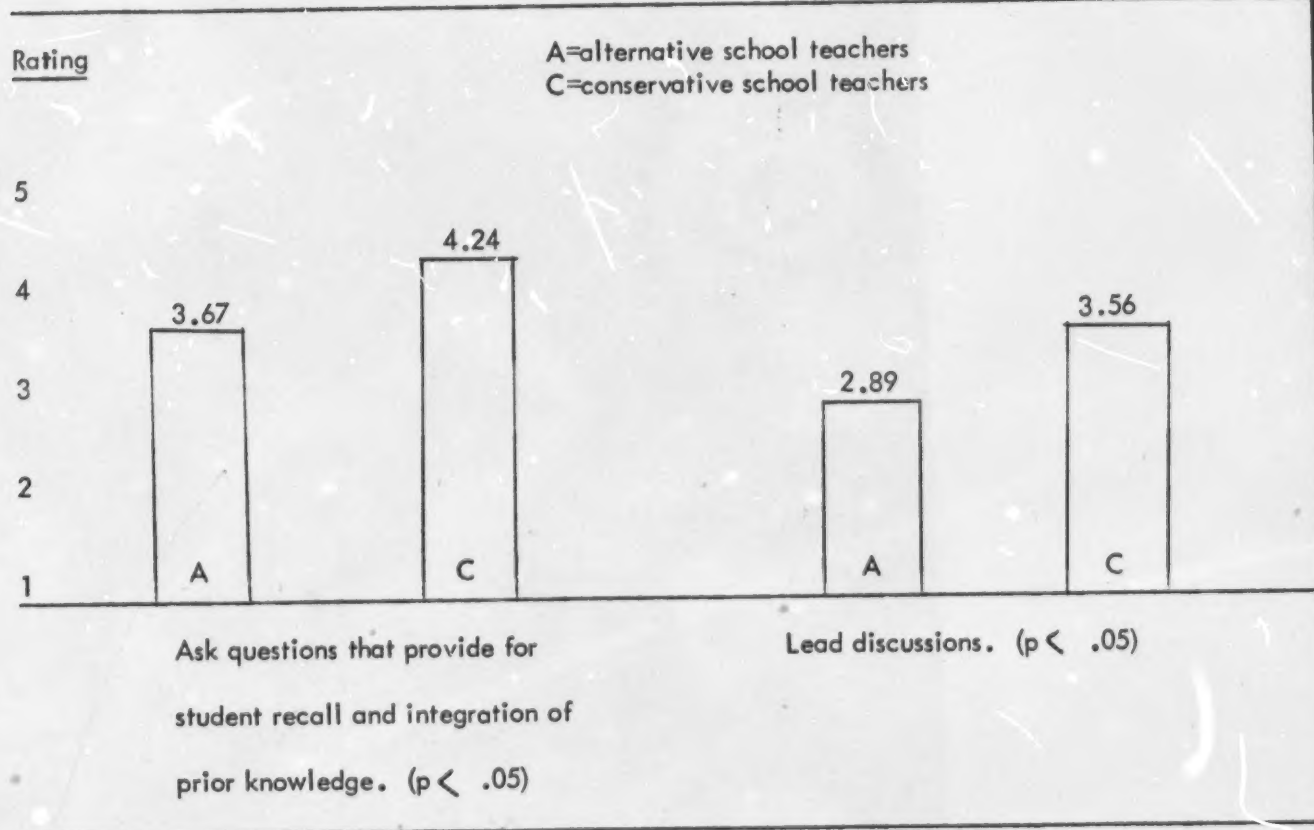


FIGURE 3 (Continued)

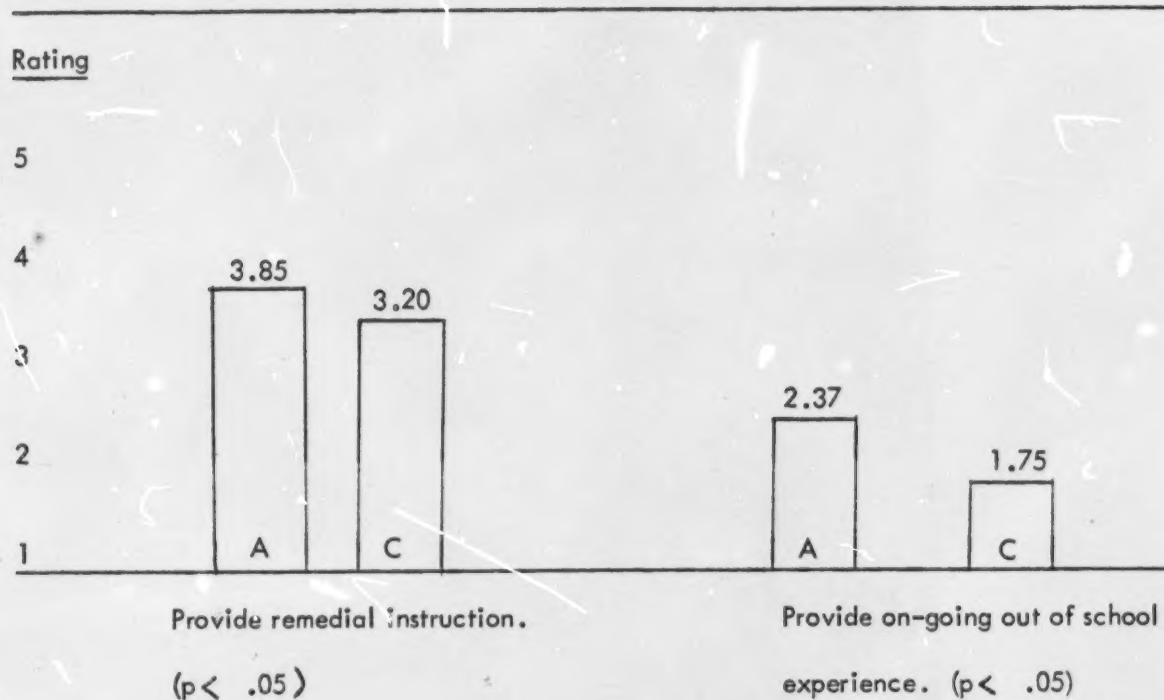


FIGURE 3 (Continued)

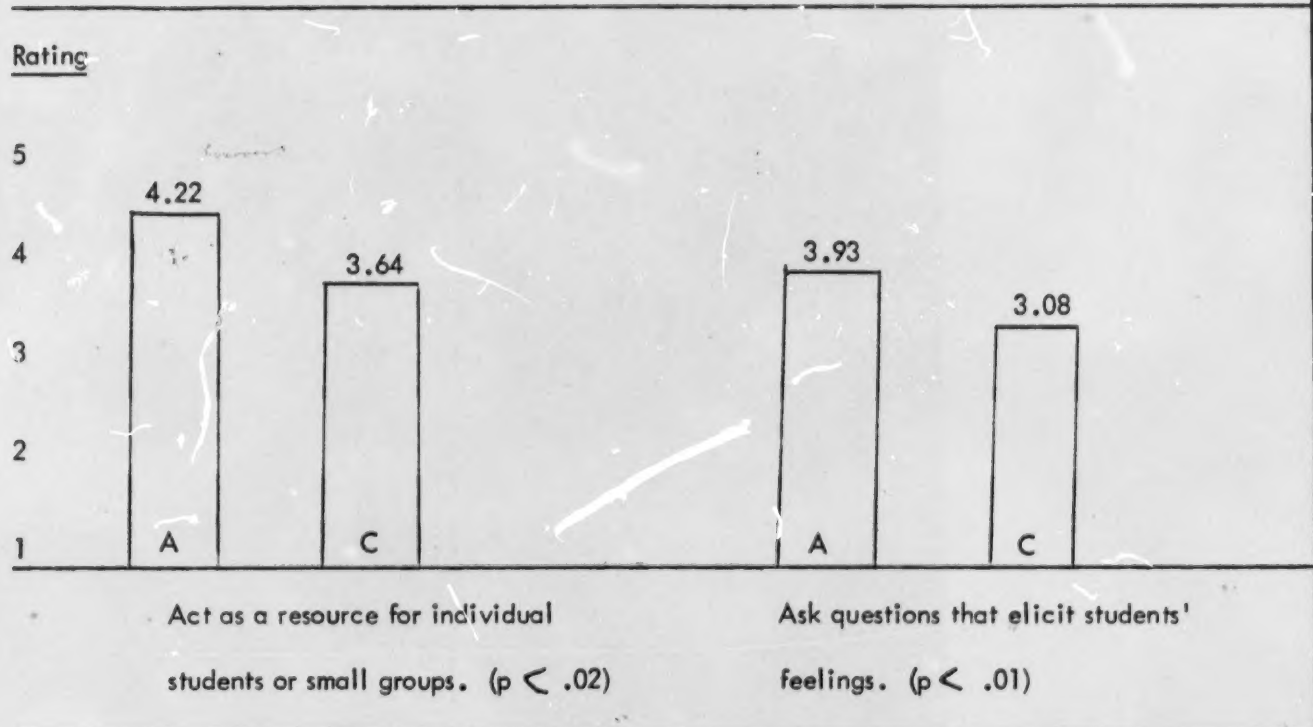


FIGURE 3 (Continued)

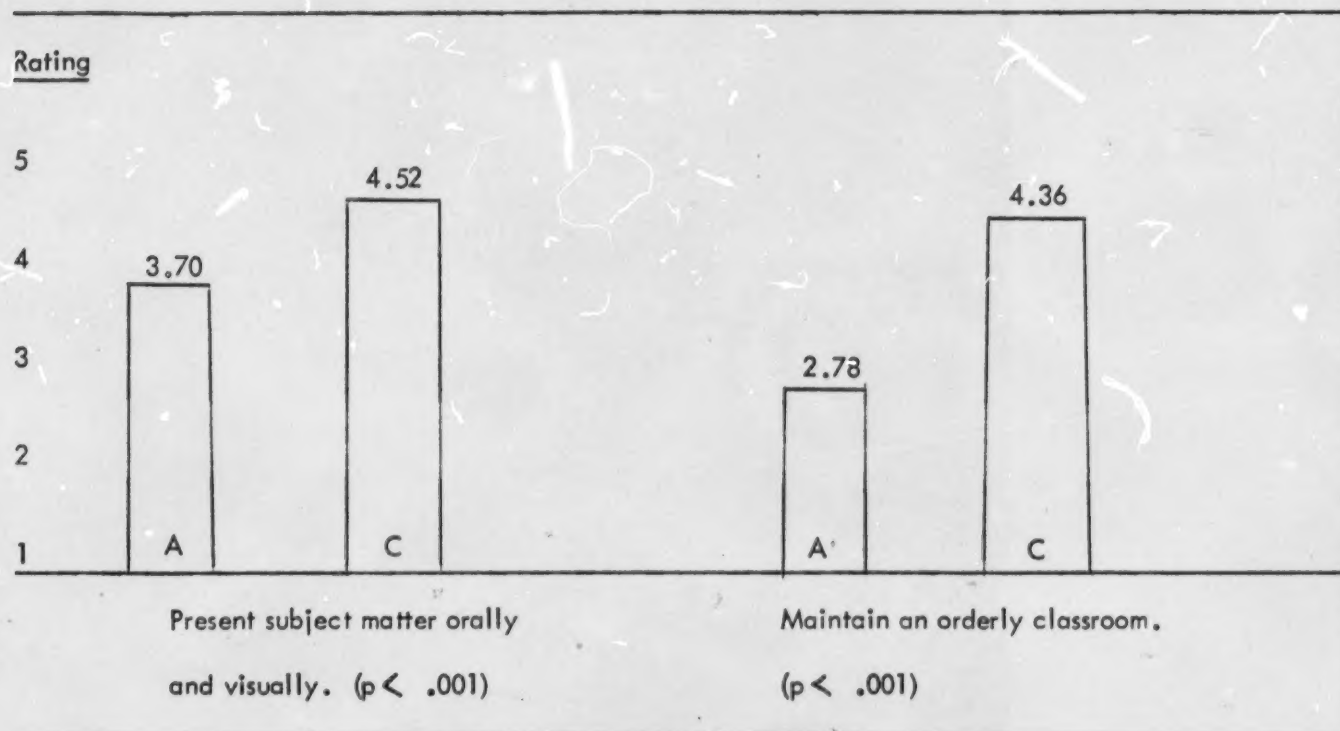


FIGURE 4
EVALUATION

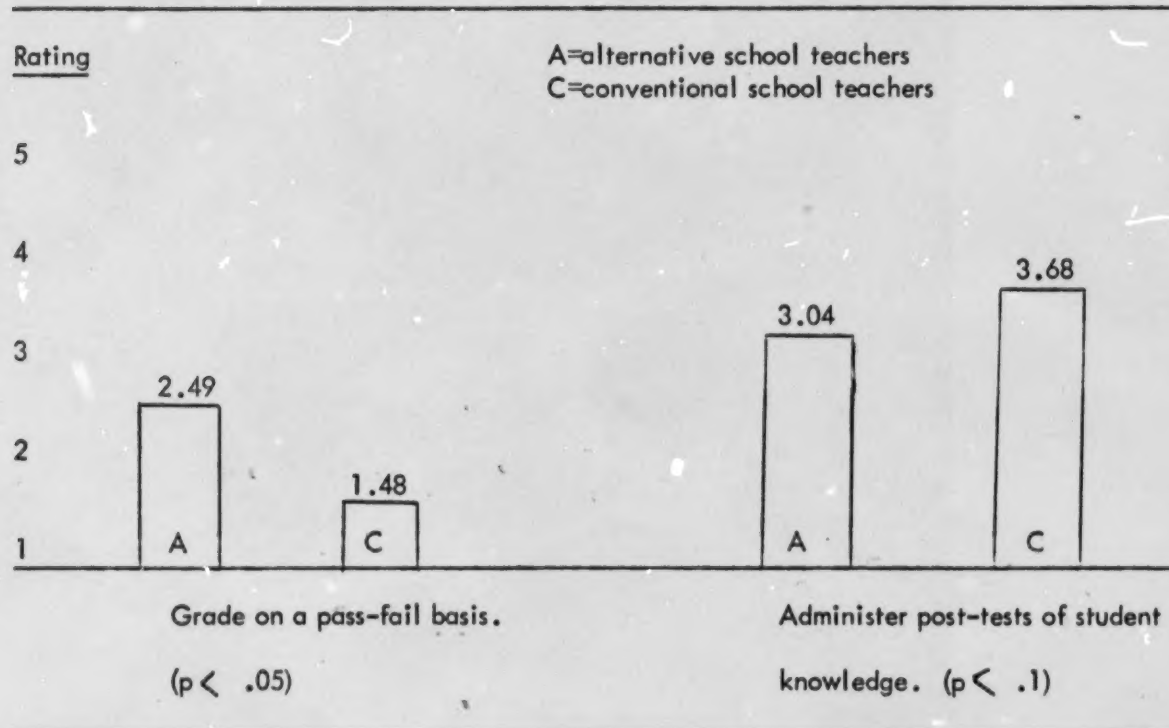


FIGURE 4 (Continued)

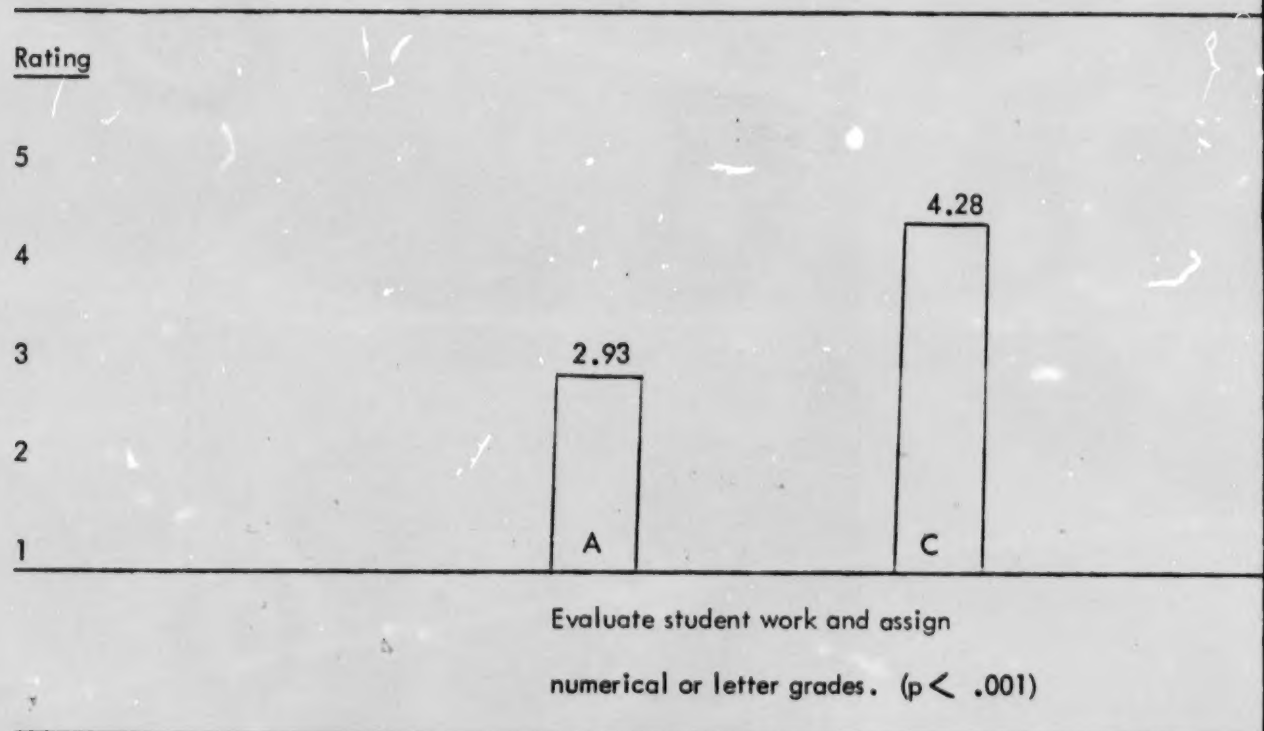


FIGURE 5
COUNSELING STUDENTS

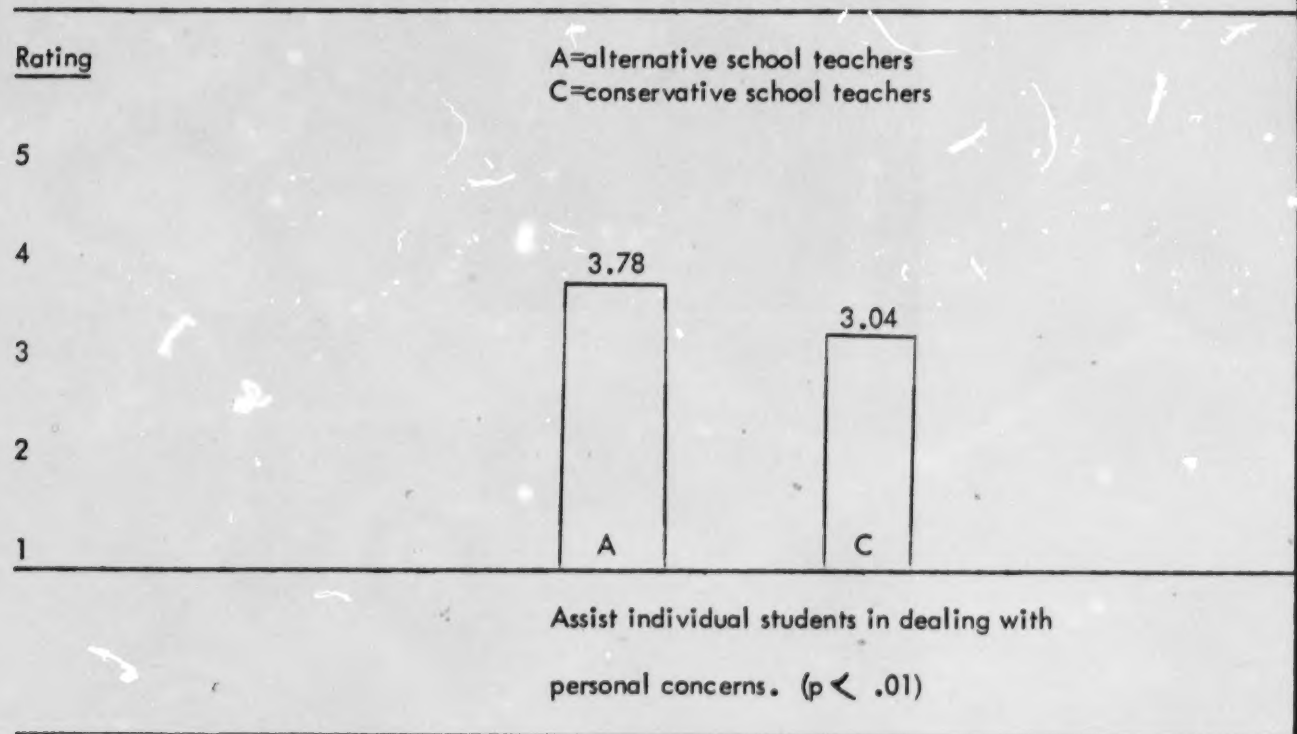


FIGURE 6
PLANNING

In the classes in my school:

A=alternative school students
C=conventional school students

	Never 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Always 10
(1) the teacher decides what students should learn. ($p < .001$)										
A/	$\bar{X}$									
	4.35									
C/	$\bar{X}$									
	7.51									
(4) the teacher helps students decide what they want to learn. ($p < .02$)										
A/	$\bar{X}$									
	6.53									
C/	$\bar{X}$									
	5.00									
(5) the teacher decides what we will do in class. ($p < .001$)										
A/	$\bar{X}$									
	5.94									
C/	$\bar{X}$									
	8.61									
(8) the teacher helps students decide what to do in class. ($p < .05$)										
A/	$\bar{X}$									
	6.70									
C/	$\bar{X}$									
	5.98									

FIGURE 7

INSTRUCTION AND CLASS MANAGEMENT

In the classes in my school:

A=alternative school students
C=conventional school students

	Never	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Always	10
(6) small groups work on different things during class. ($p < .001$)	A/						$\bar{X}$					/
	C/				$\bar{X}$		6.12					/
					4.21							
(10) the teacher leads discussions. ($p < .02$)	A/						$\bar{X}$					/
	C/						6.00			$\bar{X}$		/
										7.35		
(12) we take overnight field trips. ($p < .001$)	A/			$\bar{X}$								/
	C/				$\bar{X}$							/
					1.29							
(13) we spend part of the school day working or studying in the community. ($p < .001$)	A/						$\bar{X}$					/
	C/						5.33					/
					$\bar{X}$							
					2.16							

FIGURE 7 (Continued)

	Never	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Always
											10
(14) the teacher lectures. ($p < .001$)	A/				$\bar{X}$						
					4.35						
	C/							$\bar{X}$			
								7.04			
(17) the teacher asks questions about information we have learned. ($p < .05$)	A/							$\bar{X}$			
								7.18			
	C/								$\bar{X}$		
									8.22		
(20) students work individually at their own pace. ($p < .001$)	A/							$\bar{X}$			
								7.73			
	C/				$\bar{X}$						
					4.61						
(26) students sign learning contracts. ($p < .001$)	A/							$\bar{X}$			
								6.03			
	C/		$\bar{X}$								
			2.29								

FIGURE 8
EVALUATION

In the classes in my school:

A=alternative school students
C=conventional school students

	Never 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Always 10
(22) the teacher gives students a pre-test before beginning a topic or unit. ($p < .01$)	A/				$\bar{X}$ 5.03					
	C/		$\bar{X}$ 3.06							
(23) the teacher gives students a test after a topic or unit is completed. ($p < .01$)	A/						$\bar{X}$ 7.29			
	C/								$\bar{X}$ 9.17	
(24) the teacher gives numerical or letter grades on report cards. ($p < .01$)	A/							$\bar{X}$ 8.06		
	C/									$\bar{X}$ 9.63
(25) written evaluations of students' work are sent to parents. ($p < .001$)	A/						$\bar{X}$ 6.32			
	C/		$\bar{X}$ 3.63							

FIGURE 9
COUNSELING STUDENTS

In the classes in my school:

A=alternative school students
C=conventional school students

	Never 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Always 10
(9) the teacher helps students individually with their problems. ($p < .001$)	A/						$\bar{X}$			/
							6.53			
	C/		$\bar{X}$							/
			3.57							

TABLE 1
RANKING OF THE TEACHING FUNCTIONS

	Alternative School Teachers	Conventional School Teachers	Difference in Ranking
1. Select learning objectives appropriate for students.	2	8	6
2. Locate and select audio-visual materials.	21	16	5
3. Locate and select material to supplement textbooks.	10.5	7	3.5
4. Assist students in clarifying and deciding on their learning objectives.	5	15	10
5. Adapt material from several sources in lieu of a textbook.	6	9	3
6. Plan learning activities for the class.	12	2	10
7. Invent and prepare learning materials.	9	11	2
8. Plan varied learning activities for sub-groups within class.	17.5	26	8.5
9. Maintain an orderly classroom.	24	1	23
10. Assist students in planning their own activities.	4	17	13
11. Assist individual students in dealing with personal concerns.	10.5	18	7.5
12. Lead discussions.	30	10	20
13. Provide short-term out-of-school experiences (arrange and supervise one-day field trips, picnics, etc.)	27	24	3

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Alternative School Teachers	Conventional School Teachers	Difference in Ranking
14. Provide extended out-of-school experiences (arrange and supervise overnight field trips, camping trips, etc.)	28	33	5
15. Provide on-going out-of-school experiences (arrange and supervise work-study experiences, supervise students performing community service, etc.)	34	31	3
16. Present subject matter orally and visually.	16	3	13
17. Use community resources in class (invite speakers, obtain material from social service agencies, government, industry, etc.)	25	27	2
18. Ask questions that provide for student recall and integration of prior knowledge.	15	4	11
19. Use simulations.	23	30	7
20. Act as a resource for individual students or small groups.	3	12	9
21. Ask questions that elicit student ideas.	7	6	1
22. Provide remedial instruction.	8	19	11
23. Elicit and use student reactions to modify instructional methods.	13	13	0
24. Use programmed instructional material.	26	29	3
25. Administer pre-tests of student knowledge.	31	28	3

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Alternative School Teachers	Conventional School Teachers	Difference in Ranking
26. Administer pre-tests of student attitudes.	36	36	0
27. Administer post-tests of student knowledge.	17.5	14	3.5
28. Administer post-tests of student attitudes.	33	32	1
29. Facilitate group processes within class.	20	23	3
30. Use written evaluations of student achievement.	32	21	11
31. Evaluate student work and assign numerical or letter grades.	29	5	24
32. Use student learning contracts.	19	34	15
33. Grade on a pass-fail basis.	35	35	0
34. Select or prepare material for individualized learning.	1	22	21
35. Ask questions that elicit students' feelings.	14	20	6
36. Maintain resource centers or learning centers in the classroom.	22	25	3

The findings indicate that the alternative school teachers' perceptions of their teaching practices differ markedly from the conventional school teachers' perceptions. Differences in ranking are especially striking when one looks at the functions deemed most important by each group. The teaching function ranked first by the conventional school teachers was ranked twenty-fourth by the alternative school faculty members. Conversely, the function ranked number one by the alternative school teachers was ranked twenty-second by teachers in the conventional schools. Not one of the five functions ranked highest by the alternative school teachers appeared in the conventional school teachers top five. Only one of the alternative school teachers top five was included in the conventional school teachers top ten functions. In fact, only four common items are found in both groups' top ten. The following exhibit compares the first ten functions as ranked by alternative and conventional school teachers.

EXHIBIT 3

COMPARISON OF RANKINGS

<u>Alternative School Teachers</u>		<u>Conventional School Teachers</u>	
<u>Rank</u>	<u>Function</u>	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Function</u>
1.	Select or prepare materials for individualized learning.	1.	Maintain an orderly classroom.
2.	Select learning objectives appropriate for students.	2.	Plan learning activities for the class.
3.	Act as a resource for individuals or small groups.	3.	Present subject matter orally and visually.
4.	Assist students in planning their own learning activities.	4.	Ask questions that provide for student recall and integration of prior knowledge.
5.	Assist students in clarifying and deciding on their learning objectives.	5.	Evaluate student work and assign numerical or letter grades.
6.	Adapt material from several sources in lieu of a textbook.	6.	Ask questions that elicit students' ideas.
7.	Ask questions that elicit student ideas.	7.	Locate and select material to supplement textbooks.
8.	Provide remedial instruction.	8.	Select learning objectives appropriate for students.
9.	Invent and prepare learning materials.	9.	Adapt material from several sources in lieu of a textbook.
10.	Assist individual students in dealing with personal concerns AND Locate and select material to supplement textbooks.	10.	Lead discussions.

The results of the student questionnaire strongly suggest that the alternative school teachers differ from their conventional school colleagues in practice as well as in expressed beliefs. A comparison of the data represented in Figures 1 - 5 with that represented in Figures 6 - 9 shows congruence between students' perceptions of their teachers' practices and teachers' perceptions of their own practices.

In the area of planning (see Figures 1 and 6), the data indicates alternative school teachers are more likely to include students in the decision-making process. The alternative school students gave higher ratings to item four, "The teacher helps students decide what they want to learn," and item eight, "The teacher helps students decide what to do in class," and lower ratings to items one, "The teacher decides what students should learn," and five, "The teacher decides what we will do in class." This student-centered approach to planning is reflected in the alternative school teachers' expressed emphasis on planning varied learning activities for sub-groups within class, assisting students in planning their own learning activities, and assisting students in clarifying and deciding on their learning objectives. On the other hand, conventional school teachers' responses indicated they were much more likely to decide what students should learn and what learning activities should take place. They also were more likely to involve the entire class in the same learning activity.

The alternative school teachers' higher rating of function one, "Select learning objectives appropriate for students," is not necessarily incompatible with a student-centered approach. The seeming contradiction may be explained by the fact that while alternative school teachers place high value on student participation in selecting objectives, they consider themselves ultimately responsible for eliciting, clarifying, and endorsing objectives that best meet students' needs.

Responses to items dealing with instruction and class management provide further evidence that the alternative school teachers are more student-centered in their instructional approach than the teachers in conventional schools (see Figures 3 and 7). Alternative school teachers are

less likely to lecture, lead discussions, or direct student recitation. They are more likely to provide individualized learning experiences. Alternative school students indicated they more frequently work at their own pace, sign learning contracts, and break into small groups that work on different tasks. Alternative school teachers place greater emphasis on acting as a resource for individuals and small groups and on providing remedial instruction. Responses of both students and teachers indicated that conventional school instructors place greater emphasis on lecturing, asking questions of recall, and leading discussions.

The alternative school teachers seem interested not only in individualization of instruction but also in personalization of their teaching. They are more likely to take their students on overnight trips, to ask questions that draw out students' feelings, and to assist individual students with personal concerns. That alternative school teachers more frequently act as counselor is strongly indicated by both teacher and student responses. (Compare Figures 5 and 9.)

Teaching function nine, "Maintain an orderly classroom," was rated substantially lower by the alternative school teachers. In fact, the difference was significant at the .001 level. While the conventional school teachers had ranked function nine first, alternative school teachers ranked it twenty-fourth. At the same time, however, the two groups of students responded with no statistically significant difference to the statement, "In the classes in my school, the teacher keeps the class quiet and orderly." Apparently the alternative school students perceive an adequate degree of order in their classes and attribute this atmosphere to their teachers' actions. Previous educational experience could have conditioned the alternative school teachers to equate traditional, authoritarian classroom control with the maintenance of an orderly learning environment. They may recognize that their classroom organization differs greatly from that of the traditional classroom, and therefore perceive themselves as de-emphasizing orderliness. In fact, they may be doing as much to maintain an orderly atmosphere as the conventional school teachers, though

perhaps through a more individualized, informal approach. It is possible that the alternative school teachers are creating classroom environments that enable students to learn self-control, the result being an orderly classroom.

In the area of evaluation, the alternative school teachers indicated a marked de-emphasis on grading. (See Figures 4 and 8.) They rated the function of evaluating student work and assigning numerical or letter grades considerably lower than the conventional school teachers ($p < .001$). While the alternative school teachers rated grading on a pass-fail basis somewhat higher than the control group ($p < .05$), in overall ranking of importance, the alternative school teachers put that function next to the bottom. Alternative school teachers said they were more likely to use written evaluations of student work and less likely to administer post-tests of student knowledge, but neither difference was significant at the .05 level.

Student responses reflect the alternative school teachers' de-emphasis of traditional evaluation methods. Alternative school students' responses indicated they take fewer post-tests of knowledge and are less likely to receive traditional report cards than their conventional school counterparts. It is interesting to note, however, that the alternative school students report they are more likely (.01) than the conventional school students to be given pre-tests, perhaps reflecting alternative school teachers' attention to individualization and remediation. (See Figure 8.) Conventional school teachers, on the other hand, appeared to place high priority on testing and grading. Student responses to items twenty-two and twenty-five provided more evidence that alternative school teachers attempt to individualize both instruction and evaluation. Alternative school students perceived substantially higher rates of frequency for pre-testing and for the sending of written evaluations to their parents.

Interestingly, teaching functions that involve direct contact with students revealed more significant differences between the two groups of teachers than did those functions dealing with selection and use of materials. Although the alternative school teachers were less disposed to use

textbooks than the conventional school teachers, there were no significant ($p < .05$) differences in responses to the following teaching functions: locate and select audio-visual resources; locate and select material to supplement textbooks; invent and prepare learning materials; use simulations; use programmed instructional material.

The data suggests that instruction in the alternative schools focuses on the individual learner and his needs and includes him in decision-making to a greater extent than in the conventional schools. It appears that the public alternative school teachers emphasize the process of learning -- deciding on objectives, choosing learning activities to meet those objectives, and pacing the learning to suit individuals' needs. They are less likely than the conventional school teachers to emphasize content and product -- presenting information and evaluating students' cognitive learning.

The following chart summarizes the alternative school teaching style reflected in the data.

EXHIBIT 4

COMPARISON OF TEACHERS IN PUBLIC ALTERNATIVE
SCHOOLS WITH CONVENTIONAL SCHOOL TEACHERS

Alternative school teachers are more likely to:	Alternative school teachers are less likely to:
Include students in planning.	Lead discussions.
Use learning contracts.	Lecture.
Have learning centers in the room.	Ask questions requiring recall.
Individualize instruction.	Maintain an orderly atmosphere by direct command.
Have varied learning activities in progress at the same time.	Give tests.
Make provisions for out-of-school learning activities.	Assign numerical or letter grades.
Act as a resource.	
Ask affective questions.	
Provide remedial instruction.	
Give pre-tests.	
Grade on a pass-fail basis.	
Write narrative evaluations of students' progress.	
Assist students with personal concerns.	
Use a variety of material in place of a textbook.	

Conclusions

Findings show that the public alternative school teachers' beliefs about their instructional practices differ in a number of significant ways from those of conventional school teachers in the same district. Student responses indicate that the alternative school teachers' actual instructional practices also differ significantly from that of the conventional school teachers. Alternative schools operated by a public school district, then, may be able to provide a variety of instructional climates meeting different student needs.

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